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A

LETTER

ON

SPECULATIVE MASONRY:

BY

CHARLES PINCKNEY SUMNER,

Sheriff of Suffolk County.

7568.208

BEING AN ANSWER TO A LETTER ADDRESSED TO HIM

ON THAT SUBJECT BY THE

SUFFOLK COMMITTEE.

Boston:

JOHN MARSH, Nos. 96 & 98 STATE STREET.

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LETTER TO SHERIFF SUMNER.

To Charles P. Sumner, Esq.,

Sheriff of the County of Suffolk.

Sir :—On the evening of the 18th inst. a meeting of the Suffolk Committee was held at the Merchant's Hall, to consider and adopt such measures as to them should appear best calculated further to enlighten the public mind respecting the principles of Free Masonry. The result of this meeting was the choice of a Committee, whose names are undersigned, to obtain from gentlemen of known candor and respectability, who are Masons, their opinion in writing, whether there be any utility in the continuance of Masonic Associations in this country—and if there be, how far they are to be regarded as scientific, benevolent, and religious? If there be not, what is their civil, social, and political influence

upon the community? The light of truth, Sir, in relation to the foregoing inquiries, is what the undersigned, and those with whom they act, are seeking after—and if the free expression of your sentiments upon them, and upon the subject of Free Masonry generally, should not be deemed by you incompatible with paramount obligations, a communication of them in writing would be highly acceptable, not only to this Committee, but as they believe, to a very great majority of the public.

Your elevated station as a public officer, your acknowledged candor and impartiality, and your early acquaintance with Masonic obligations, are the reasons offered by this Committee for addressing you on this interesting subject.

Your respectful and obedient Servants,

GEO. ODIORNE,
JOHN D. WILLIAMS,
ABNER PHELPS,
BENJ. W. LAMB,
WM. MARSTON,
HENRY GASSETT.
} *Committee.*

Boston, Sept. 18th, 1829.

LETTER.

Gentlemen,

In answering your letter of the 18th of September, I cannot speak of Masonry with unqualified censure; much less with unqualified praise.

When I was twenty-five years old I became a Mason, joined a Lodge and continued connected with it about seven years. I left it with good feelings towards the members, but with no great respect for the institution. We each made a promise at being initiated that we would disclose none of the secrets of the degree to which we were admitted. This promise is sometimes called an obligation. The words of it were never by me committed to memory, and never but once uttered by me; no body but the master ever undertook to repeat it. I never saw it in print; nor till within a year past did I ever see any thing like it. It could not be printed in any book of Masonic authority. I have considered it till recently, as resting solely upon tradition: and that it could not be precisely the same in two remote countries, nor in the same country at different periods.

The courses of mighty rivers change in the lapse of years—the manners and customs of nations also change; much more so must Masonry and every thing else that repels the aid of printing and trusts itself to the fallible memory of man.

When I confess myself a mason, I do not mean to confess or deny that I have laid myself under any of the oaths or obligations which I have recently, and for the first time seen printed as oaths. I am not sure that a Masonic obligation is invariably in that form. I have visited three Lodges in Massachusetts and one in Georgia; and I never saw an exact similarity of proceedings in any two; some were in a higher style of decorum than others. The forms and the language were somewhat different. These things depended on the different characteristic turns of mind by which the masters and the members of the several lodges were distinguished.

But whatever the obligations of Masonry were in my earlier years, and whatever they may be now; I am convinced that it has not the merit of being a merely innocent amusement. It does not promote the cause of science, benevolence or religion: and it takes up some of that valuable time which ought to be better employed. My humble opinion was formerly different, but I am not ashamed to confess my error when I perceive it. It would be useless to read or to think, if it were not to gain new light to the understanding, and willingness to follow its guidance.

In 1801, I was gently invited to become a Mason. I enquired what Masonry was. I was answered that it was a "Noble Science founded on Geometry." Con-

scious of my deficiency in Mathematics, I could not have heard any thing to make it more alluring to me. I resolved to become a Mason, and went from step to step to the third; which is commonly the resting place of Masons. I saw many in the Lodge who understood nothing even of arithmetic, beyond the rule of three. And I looked in vain for any thing that bore the slightest resemblance to science, except only in one Lodge, where I saw drawn on the floor a diagram from Euclid, which no one attempted to explain.

When a candidate is admitted to the first degree, a charge is read to him by the master, containing some good directions, with regard to his conduct, in which charge he is informed that it is expected of him that he will at his leisure hours study the liberal arts and sciences.*

Again, when a Mason is admitted to the second degree, a charge is read to him containing among other things, these words—

"The study of the liberal arts is earnestly recommended to your consideration; especially the noble science of Geometry, which is the basis of our art."*

Nothing can be more wide of the truth than the assertion that Masonry is based upon Geometry. This delusive assertion is not among the *secrets* of Masonry; it is printed in a book issued by authority of the Grand Lodge, and sold at the bookstores; it contains Masonic History, Charges, Addresses, Odes, Songs, &c., all of

* Constitutions of the Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of F. and A. Masons, p. 177, 181.

which have a tendency to allure an inquisitive and even an ingenuous mind to seek admission to a Lodge.

After such Charges the entered Apprentice and Fellow Craft may fairly expect to see some pictures of the Grecian or Roman Temples, or to hear some entertaining account of the various kinds of ancient and modern architecture,—but Speculative Masons, like Gallio, care for none of these things.

A few days after I took my third step, I enquired of a master Mason if any known language, either living or dead, could fairly lay claim to a certain combination of three syllables which is called *the word* of a master Mason; I further enquired if Jubela, Jubelo and Jubelum, were supposed to be really Hebrew words; and the names of any working Masons in the days of Solomon. No satisfactory answer was ever given me to any inquiries of this sort; and I soon found that Free Masonry did not enable its adepts to solve questions either of Science or Philology. My experience has enabled me to say that Masonry in its three first steps is founded upon no particular art or science. It derives some aid indeed from Music, but it pays little or no regard to Geometry; and as to Logic, I never heard it named in a Lodge.

I once thought Masons uncommonly benevolent, and I now believe that they are not generally deficient in any good quality of the heart, but I fear that artificial and unnatural ties hold in bondage the kindness that has been esteemed their bright characteristic.

The abduction of Morgan in 1826, could not fail to excite general alarm; but some Masons seem to mani-

fest an apathy, a doubtfulness and a derision upon this subject, which does them no honor as masons, or as men. I hope, and I believe I have never seen a mason, who would willingly have assisted in that outrage. Yet the evidence is irresistible that Morgan has been carried off by Masonic hands; and this being so, some Masons have, in this one act, done more harm than the whole fraternity ever did good. Masonic obligations of some sort have probably led wicked and foolish men to the belief that those who take them, are thereby placed superior to all law except Masonic law; that a Mason, in becoming such, absolves himself from the laws of his country; and that owing allegiance to Masonry, he may surrender himself exclusively to its protection. This is a horrible belief, congenial to the heart of a pirate, and totally at war with that benevolence to which the fraternity have in times past made undisputed claim.

There are some good moral sentiments inculcated by Masters of Lodges; but a Lodge of Masons is no place to cherish religious impressions. They go there chiefly for recreation, and are not of that sort of men whose delight consists in singing psalms, and who can be merry in no other way. Masonry has, however, received the countenance of some grave and reverend clergymen; and I believe that when they are willing, they are received with open arms: for me to praise or to blame them would be equally vain; but I must say that I never saw a clergyman in any Lodge except the Grand Lodge, which is an assembly of the masters and wardens of subordinate Lodges, in which there is nothing said or done, at which any man can be displeased. I think it

possible that clergymen may step so lightly over the three first degrees, as scarcely to know on what they tread. I believe that they in general know little of Masonry, except what any person may gain from those printed public discourses and books, which contain none of the initiatory forms and obligations of Masonry. Those forms and obligations as practised in some of the subordinate lodges, are reprehensible; but they need not contain words of impiety. Masonry excites and cherishes good fellowship, and in some small degree, the facility of respectful deportment and debate; many of its followers have music in their souls and never seem inclined to any thing immoral; beyond the bare utterance of Masonic obligations; but there is at an initiation so much of solemnity and farce, that it would not become a clergyman to be present at the scene. No one can go from it saying "truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his son Jesus Christ."* There are many Masons who are good men, some of them are among the best of men; but none are the better by reason of their being Masons. Their weekly attendance on Sundays at any open day light church would promote and manifest their goodness, more than their monthly assembling by moonlight at any conventicle which bears the name of *Lodge*.

Masonry, in its three first degrees, makes no profession of the Christian religion; and in this, perhaps it does not disappoint the hopes of its votaries. The Church and the Lodge are under different masters; and require a different sort of service and of servants.

* 1 John i. 3.

Gentlemen, I have probably said enough to justify my belief that Masonry does not promote the cause of science, of benevolence, or of religion.

I will now proceed, as I understand it to be your wish that I should, to give you my impression with regard to its civil, social, and political influence.

Masonic engagements, whether they are called oaths, obligations or promises, ought never to be made. They are not sanctioned by law, and are not obligatory. They make it a Masonic crime to divulge that which the good of the community requires should not be concealed. The manner in which they are administered, and the matter of them, can hardly fail to excite disrespect for the institution, in the mind of the person initiated ; but their effect is neutralized by some charge, or address, which is immediately made by the master, inculcating charity, benevolence and candor towards the whole family of mankind, and a cheerful obedience to the laws and magistrates of the country in which we live. Masonic obligations have no dignity when compared with precepts like these.

It has been said that Washington in his early life was a Mason ; but he never went further than the third degree ; I believe that in his time, higher degrees were not conferred. It is not possible, by reading any book, to know what were the precise terms of Washington's Masonic obligations : but any body may know that he never agreed to kill or be killed for all the Masonry in the world. It is easy to divine the motives which probably induced *him* to become a Mason. The Old Charge used in his day, when speaking of Civil Magistracy

says, " a Mason is a peaceable subject to the civil rulers, wherever he resides or works; and is never to be concerned in plots, and conspiracies against the peace and welfare of the nation; nor behave himself undutifully to inferior magistrates." * * * " If a brother should be a rebel against the states, he is not to be countenanced in his rebellion, however he may be pitied as an unhappy man."* * * The books abound with precepts of loyalty and benevolence. It was sentiments like these which induced Washington to become a Mason; and a respect for these sentiments would have induced him to withdraw his esteem for the association, had he lived until the autumn of 1826, and heard of that outrage which evinces that Masonry, probably in some of its high and recently invented degrees, can inspire some of its votaries with the grossest misconception of their duty to the magistracy and laws of their country:—I say in some of its *high* degrees, for I am convinced that neither of the three lower degrees irresistibly require that the receiver of them should become the perpetrator of a crime upon himself or upon any one else. I say this from impressions received between twenty and thirty years ago.

It is probable that Morgan has been murdered. If there is any thing in Masonic ties that could have induced Masons to do this, they ought to disregard such ties as a lion would disregard a net of cobweb. It will be disgraceful to the institution, if its members do not all do their utmost to bring all the abductors of Morgan to *legal light* and legal punishment. In no better method can they manifest the loyalty and benevolence which they *yet* continue to declare to be their characteristics.

In our government "the whole people covenants with "each citizen and each citizen with the whole people "that all shall be governed by certain laws for the com- "mon good." Whoever violates those laws cannot be a good citizen—and can he be a good Mason?

A Masonic obligation, if it requires any breach of the law, is what no man has a right to impose, *even on a willing receiver.* It is not binding on any one who may be so indiscreet as to take it. It cannot come to good. As it is imposed in some Lodges it is illegal and wicked; and in Lodges, where it is the least reprehensible, it goes to swell the amount of those idle words which we must one day regret.

The influence of Masonry is not favorable to domestic happiness. It impairs a man's fondness for the pleasures, which, if he does his duty, he may justly expect to find *at home.* I once had occasion to see a man after ten o'clock in the evening. I called at his house; upon knocking at the door, I heard the words—*walk in,* uttered by a faint voice. I entered the room which served its tenants for a parlor and a kitchen. It was enlightened by a glimmering lamp. His wife was sitting in a rocking chair drawn to the hearth, on which was a small fire scarcely visible. One child was in her arms, and another in a cradle, within her reach, which she occasionally rocked. I asked her if I might at that late hour be permitted to see her husband. She replied, with a pale and melancholy look, "Sir, my husband has not yet returned from the Lodge." She then in a sitting posture, bent forward over her child, and with a shawl that hung loosely over her shoulders she absorbed a starting

tear. At that very moment her husband was probably in the Lodge joining his voice in the words of a favorite masonic song—

"We are true and sincere
"And just to the fair."

I withdrew from this mason's house with pity for his young wife and infant children, and with lessened respect for an institution which could thus withhold a husband and a father from the first of social duties.

Masonry alienates the minds of some men from the common pursuits of life, and inclines its votaries to things, inmoderate, incredible, and out of their reach. It styles itself but another name for Charity, but it is not modest like Charity; it vaunteth itself and is puffed up. In the subordinate Lodges it delights itself in those songs which are denominated Masonic, the burden of which is that Masons are the greatest and the best of men, companions of princes wherever they go; that they built all the superb temples and palaces in the world; that they are eminently benevolent, and the special favorites of the fair. It flaunts in the robes and titles that might become the high stations of piety or power in the Court of an eastern prince.

In a country, like ours, where all men stand upon a *level*, and where the fields of usefelness and honor are open to all, it cannot be consistent with the *wisdom* of a well regulated mind to cultivate those flowers that yield no fruit; or to decorate one's self with the ornaments that serve to make the wearer of them no more respectable than he would be in the plain garments suited to his daily calling.

If a Mason would qualify himself to become a master of a Lodge, he must load his memory with a mass of matter for which the understanding has but small affinity. If young men would quit those scenes of almost profitless amusement and attend with equal assiduity the lectures on operative masonry and architecture; on chemistry, astronomy, botany, anatomy, mineralogy, agriculture or mechanics, which might at a small expence be heard in every city, and in some villages; they would find more satisfaction to their own inquisitive minds and lose none of that respectable standing in the community which they now enjoy. If some young lawyers would give that portion of their time to legal and historical studies, which some few of them throw away in investigating the self-asserted antiquity and universality of Free Masonry, they would find themselves in higher request in their profession, masters of the Civil Law, the Admiralty Law, and Law of Nations; and possibly their chance would be fair as diplomatists, to represent their country in the presence of Kings.

Masonry is said to be a sort of accomplishment suitable for a traveller; but a knowledge of the language of the country he visits, and of the business he goes to transact will set him above the necessity of any aid or pleasure to be derived from masonic knowledge or masonic acquaintances; and as to those who are content to remain in their own country, if a man will mind his own affairs, and abstain from those habits of *moderate drinking*, at which the genius of Masonry takes no offence, he will seldom need any of the pecuniary aid that the funds of Masonry can bestow.

It deserves to be mentioned to the praise of Masonry in Boston, that the Lodges have, as I hear, dispensed with refreshments. This is an improvement worthy of all acceptation. The Master and Wardens of the Massachusetts Lodge a quarter of a century ago would have thought that time could go on without the succession of day and night, as soon as a Lodge of Free Masons could be ruled and governed without the alternation of labor and refreshment. It has also given me pleasure to learn that philosophical lectures have recently been introduced in some of the Lodges in Boston. These lectures would doubtless be good in any place. In a Lodge they are like scions grafted upon a tree which must wonder at the unaccustomed beauty of its own fruit.

I have never considered Masonry as having any distinct political influence in this Commonwealth. There are some who seem to think differently; and it is with grief that I have seen in print any insinuation that the administration of justice is under Masonic influence.* I am convinced that this is unmerited here. My observation does not permit me to believe that such influence has extended to any department of government. Let Masonry be gently divested of its borrowed plumes, but not loaded with that which it does not deserve to bear.

Every man who is a Mason will be frank enough to confess it, and until the question is proposed to him it cannot be right that he should be charged with Masonry by those who consider it a cause of reproach. Such a charge made against any public functionary, may do harm to the Commonwealth rather than to Masonry.

I have recently seen a paragraph which is said to have

* See Mr. Churchill's Speech of Jan. 1, 1829, at Dedham.

been printed in an oration delivered by Mr. Brainard, a distinguished Mason, at New London in Connecticut, on the 24th June, 1825. It is in these words:—

"What is Masonry now? it is powerful: it comprises "men of rank, wealth, office, and talent, in power and out "of power, and that in almost every place where power "is of any importance; and it comprises among other "classes of the community, to the lowest, in large num- "bers, active men united together and capable of being "directed by the efforts of others, so as to have the "force of concert throughout the civilized world. They "are distributed too with the means of knowing one "another, and the means of keeping secret, and the "means of co-operating in the desk, in the legislative "hall, on the bench, in every gathering of business, in "every party of pleasure, in every enterprize of gov- "ernment, in every domestic circle, in peace and in "war, among enemies and friends, in one place as well "as another. So powerful indeed is it at this time, that "it fears nothing from violence either public or pri- "vate; for it has every means to learn it in season, to "counteract, defeat, and punish it."

Having seen Masonry only in its three incipient steps, and but little or nothing of it for many years past, I am not able to attribute to it any such mighty sagacity and power as the author of that oration so boldly arrogates for it. Every one however will judge of this, as his own knowledge and good sense shall dictate. If he has given a true description of Masonry, it ought to be dreaded as a pestilence that walketh in darkness. We have

no Police vigilant and strong enough to cope with it. It can, if it pleases, throw a flood of light upon the last miserable scene of Morgan's life. If any part of this mystery of iniquity is to remain undeveloped, it must be because Masonic obligations, have an influence more powerful than those of justice. If what Mr. Brainard has said be not true, he has done wrong to the cause he advocates, and must in the opinion of its friends deserve some punishment, perhaps almost as severe as that which awaits a man in England who is an utterer of *false news*, or *false and pretended prophecies*, calculated to give unfounded alarm to the people.*

The abduction of Morgan, which followed soon after the publication of that remarkable paragraph, has excited perhaps a just belief that the existence of Masonry is incompatible with the personal security of those who reveal its mysteries. However well or ill founded this belief may be, I hope no cause for it will long exist; but that the subordinate Lodges will upon due consideration, surrender their charters to the Grand Lodge, and close this great concern, which some pretend has been going on (quietly till now,) ever since the days of Adam. Masonry will thus subside and come to a peaceful and honorable death. In no better way can Masons display the respect and benevolence which they feel for their uninitiated brethren of the human family, than by voluntarily walking with them on the common level of citizenship.

* 4 Vol. Blackstone's Commentaries, p. 149.

If every Mason will read the VIII Chapter of the 1 Corinthians with the feelings of a good Christian, I think he will be ready to say, "Meat commendeth us not to God. Neither if we eat are we the better; neither if we eat not are we the worse."* * *" Wherefore if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no meat so long as the world standeth."—As it is with meat, so let it be with Masonry; seeing it has become a cause of disquietude to "them that are without."

Some think that Masonry does no harm; but I believe it does no good, but what may be effected by less exceptionable means; and that no considerate citizen will hereafter surrender himself to unknown obligations, which a large portion of his countrymen deem incompatible with the faith and allegiance that are due to the Commonwealth.

The enlightened public have ceased to view Masonry with respect; books which are generally believed have disclosed those disgusting penalties which a generous Mohawk would blush to inflict on an enemy who had caused the destruction of half his race. Perhaps the benevolence of Masons will never permit them to inflict what the revealers of Masonic secrets declare to be Masonic penalties; but if the bud is alive, however inert, it may one day expand and produce the fruit of death.

I cannot flatter myself that my present views of Masonry exactly coincide with those of any one else; but such as they now are, or may at any time hereafter be,

I shall not withhold them from any inquirer whose motives I believe to be good.

Gentlemen, I request you to accept an assurance of my respect,

C. P. SUMNER.

October 19, 1829.

HON. GEORGE ODIORNE,
JOHN D. WILLIAMS,
ABNER PHELPS,
BENJAMIN W. LAMB,
WILLIAM MARSTON,
HENRY GASSETT, Esquires.

} COMMITTEE.